

VZCZCXRO9284  
PP RUEHROV  
DE RUEHTV #2630/01 3301506  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 251506Z NOV 08  
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9317  
INFO RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN  
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 0859  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002630

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VT](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: MFA DISCUSSES NEGOTIATIONS WITH VATICAN, POSSIBLE  
POPE VISIT

REF: A. REIDHEAD-NEA/IPA-FOLEY E-MAIL 11/21/08  
[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 2115  
[1](#)C. VATICAN 1 AND PREVIOUS  
[1](#)D. 07 TEL AVIV 3487 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Luis G. Moreno for reasons 1.4 (B/D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment: MFA Director for Inter-Religious Affairs Bahij Mansour told Poloff that negotiations with the Vatican over outstanding issues related to the Fundamental Agreement were going well, and that Israel expected a "breakthrough" at the December 18 plenary session in Rome. According to Mansour, the sides were near agreement on language to resolve the taxation issue (reftels), and hoped to present it as agreed text at the plenary. Mansour also revealed that Pope Benedict XVI was hoping to visit Israel in early May. Stressing that the plans for a possible visit were very sensitive, Mansour asked that we treat this information as confidential. Mansour also said he heard from Cardinal Kasper, the Vatican's point person on Catholic-Jewish relations, that Pope Benedict was increasingly inclined to delay the controversial beatification of Pope Pius XII. News of progress in the negotiations and a possible Papal visit are welcome developments, if true. However, we have heard such rosy assessments from the Israelis many times before, and yet real progress in GOI-Vatican relations has remained elusive. End Summary and comment.

-----  
GOI Believes Breakthrough Imminent  
-----

[1](#)2. (C) According to MFA Director for Inter-Religious Affairs Bahij Mansour, who is also the Israeli coordinator for negotiations with the Vatican, GOI and Vatican negotiators made significant progress during their last round of working-level talks on November 6. Pointing to what he called a spirit of compromise on both sides, Mansour said the MFA was hopeful that a "breakthrough" deal to settle the property tax ("arnona") issue would be agreed at the next plenary negotiating session in Rome on December 18. Mansour declined to elaborate, but was confident that the Vatican would be pleased. He said the Ministry of Interior still needed to approve the MFA's taxation plan, but stressed the MOI was aware of the idea and had already expressed general support. He expected MFA and MOI experts to begin hammering out the final details in early December. Mansour said MFA DG Abramovich would again lead the Israeli delegation to the plenary talks.

-----  
Papal Visit in May?  
-----

[1](#)3. (C) Mansour also revealed that Israel was in discussions with the Vatican over the possibility of a Papal visit to the Holy Land in early May 2009 (please protect). Mansour, who

somewhat over-optimistically described the visit as a done deal, said the visit would be designed so that Pope Benedict XVI could demonstrate commitment to local Catholics, Christian holy sites, and the peace process. Stressing that few in his own government knew about the visit, Mansour asked us to treat this information as strictly confidential until the Vatican makes any diplomatic approaches or public announcements of its own. He said a Vatican advance team would arrive to begin surveying sites during the second week of December. Asked if the visit was contingent on finalizing the Fundamental Agreement negotiations, Mansour said no, that the two were not necessarily related (although he did acknowledge that a breakdown in the talks could forestall the expected visit). (Note: The last and only other Papal visit to Israel was by John Paul II in 2000. That visit was hailed by Israel as a diplomatic victory symbolizing the full normalization of relations with the Vatican.)

-----  
Putting Pius on Hold?  
-----

¶4. (C) Mansour said he also discussed the controversy surrounding the beatification of Pope Pius XII with Cardinal Walter Kasper on the margins of the last Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee meeting in Budapest November 9-12. According to Mansour, Cardinal Kasper, who heads the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, told him that Pope Benedict was not likely to move forward with the beatification of Pius XII until the Vatican finishes the process of opening its archives to outside researchers, which is expected to take several more years. (Note: Recent

TEL AVIV 00002630 002 OF 002

moves by Pope Benedict to beatify Pius have been met with strong opposition from Israel and international Jewish organizations, which remain critical of Pius for failing to use his position to speak out more forcefully against the systematic murder of Jews during the Holocaust. Israel has not been swayed by the Vatican argument that Pius did more behind the scenes to save Jews than is commonly known, and has demanded the opening of the Vatican's archives from that period as a prelude to any change of heart regarding the legacy of Pope Pius.)

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Mansour's account of a possible breakthrough in the negotiations, followed by a Papal visit in May, would be welcome news, if true. We remain skeptical, however, as we have heard the same rosy story about imminent breakthroughs and warming GOI-Vatican relations for years, yet somehow the promised progress has not materialized. We are also skeptical that the Pope could commit to a visit to Israel barring at least some progress in the talks. We understand from Embassy Holy See (Ref. A) that the Pope would also find it difficult to visit Israel unless the humanitarian situation in Gaza improves markedly. It is perhaps not a good sign that the Pope's own envoy, Nuncio Antonio Franco, was himself denied permission to enter Gaza November 23 to deliver mass to a Catholic congregation (Ref. B). At the same time, Embassy contacts throughout the Catholic community continue to assert a constant array of problems with Israeli authorities, from getting or renewing visas to performing routine maintenance and custodial functions at churches, monasteries and holy sites.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Visit Embassy Tel Aviv's Classified Website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/telaviv>

You can also access this site through the State Department's Classified SIPRNET website.

\*\*\*\*\*  
MORENO